

THE VISIT OF POPE FRANCIS TO THE UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
3-5 FEBRUARY, 2019

Pope's in-flight press conference

05 February 2019, Abu Dhabi to Rome

Alessandro Gisotti, interim director of the Holy See Press Office:
Good afternoon, Holy Father. Good afternoon to you all. We journalists frequently use the adjective 'historic,' and at times they tell us we use it too often. Maybe for this trip we used it well and many used it in different languages. Truly a short trip in length but with a really long horizon, and all hope that the fruits and the seeds of these days will be long-lasting. Clearly a trip, as was seen today a few hours ago, a meeting with a people... of many peoples. The organizers were saying around 100 nationalities were present. And then yesterday this [joint] document, obviously extraordinary, valuable.

A surprise, but I imagine one of those surprises that is a pleasure for colleagues to recount for its importance. I do not know if before the questions, Holy Father, you want to address some words?

Pope Francis: First of all, hello, thank you for the company. It was too short of a trip, but for me it was a great experience. It's that I think that every trip is historic, also each of our days, to write the story of every day... no story is small, every story is big and worthy even if [judged to be] bad, the dignity is hidden, can always come up. Thank you so much for your collaboration.

Gisotti: Ok, let's begin with the questions. As is tradition, starting with the local journalists. This document which is full of information really raises many reflections. The first to address the question to the Holy Father is Barham from Sky News Arabia.

Sargon Hurmez Barham, Sky News Arabia: Holiness, what will be the outcome of this trip and what were your impressions of the country, of the United Arab Emirates?

Pope Francis: I saw a modern country. The city struck me, even the cleanliness of the city, also small curiosities like how do they water the flowers in this desert? But also a modern country... also welcoming of so many peoples that come here, but also a country that looks to the future. The example: the education of children. They educate them looking to the future, always. So they have told me. Then a thing that struck me, the problem of water... they are considering in the near future to take water from the sea, to make it potable and even the water of the humidity to make it drinkable... always searching for new things. And I even heard from someone, "one day the petroleum will be gone. We are preparing ourselves for that day, now, to have something to do." This is a country that looks to the future.

Then it seemed to me [to be] an open country, not closed, even the religiosity of Islamism, it is an open Islamism, not closed, of dialogue, a fraternal and peaceful Islamism. On this [point], they emphasize education to peace, that is felt to be a duty, although there are some problems of some wars in the area, but this I have not heard... Then for me the meeting with the elders was very touching. The elders of Islamism, it is a profound thing, they were a little from everywhere, of various cultures. This shows, however, the openness of this country to a certain regional, universal, religious dialogue. Then I was struck also by the interreligious convention, this is a strong cultural event. And also I mentioned in my speech what they did here, last year, [a conference] on the protection of children, but in media, on the internet... in these things... because child pornography today is an industry with a lot of money, and they profit from children and this country realized it and did that. Positive things. Surely there are problems, negative

things, but in a trip of less than three days these things are not seen and if you see one, a person looks the other way. Thank you for the hospitality.

Gisotti: Now Nour Salman of the Emirates News Agency will pose you a question.

Nour Salman, Emirates News Agency: Holy Father, thank you very much for your activity. The question I would like to ask you: now that the declaration of Abu Dhabi on fraternity has been signed, how will this document be applied in the future and what are your thoughts on Prince Mohammed's announcement on building a church of St. Francis next to a mosque of the Imam el-Tayeb?

Pope Francis: The document was prepared with much reflection and also praying; the Grand Imam and his team and me with mine. We prayed a lot to be able to make this document because for me there is one single great danger in this moment: destruction, war and hatred between us. And, if we believers are not capable of giving each other a hand, embracing each other and even praying, our faith will be defeated. This document is born from faith in God, who is the Father of all and the father of peace, and condemns every destruction, every terrorism. The first terrorism in history is that of Cain. It is a document that was developed over almost a year, back and forth, prayer. It remained a little confidential so as to mature, to not give birth to the child before the time, that it might be mature.

Gisotti: Holy Father, before the next question, there's an homage from the journalist of al Ittihad wants to make. In the meantime, I ask Jörg Seisselberg to get prepared. Now, Jörg Seisselberg of the German ARD will pose you a question.

Jörg Herbert Seisselberg, ARD Radio: Holy Father, this trip has been full of encounters, impressions, and images. The images of

your arrival, the honorary military welcome, and the military planes that made the design in the sky with the Vatican colors remained in my mind. I ask myself: What does this have to do with Pope Francis, with the Pope that comes with a message of peace? What do you think of this? What did you feel, what do you think in these moments?

Again on this theme of your appeal for peace in Yemen: what reactions did you receive in your meetings that create hope that this message was received, that steps towards peace will be taken in Yemen?

Pope Francis: Thank you. I interpret all of the gestures of welcome as gestures of goodwill; everyone does them according to their own cultures. What did I find here? Such a great welcome that they wanted to do everything, small things and big things, because they felt that the Pope's visit was something good. Someone also said a blessing...God knows...But they wanted me to feel that I was welcome.

About the problem of wars. You mentioned one. I know it's difficult to give an opinion after two days and having spoken about the issue, but with few people. I will say that I found goodwill in initiating peace processes. This I found. A common denominator with those I have spoken with about war situations. you mentioned Yemen: I found goodwill to initiate peace processes.

Gisotti: Domenico Agasso of La Stampa will now pose a question. It's his second papal trip, but it's the first occasion to be able to make a question in an in-flight press conference. Please.

Domenico Agasso, La Stampa: Holy Father, after the historic signing of the document on fraternity yesterday, in your perspective what do you think could be the consequences in the Islamic world? Thinking especially of the conflicts in Yemen and

Syria... And what the outcomes will there be even among Catholics, considering the fact that there is a part of Catholics that accuse you of allowing yourself to be used by Muslims.

Pope Francis: But not only the Muslims... they accuse me of allowing myself to be used by everyone, even by journalists, it is part of the job. But I want to say one thing. This I emphasize clearly. From the Catholic point of view, the document does not pull away one millimeter from Vatican II, which is even cited a few times. The document was made in the spirit of Vatican II. I wanted, before making the decision, to say it good that way and let's sign it, at least on my side, I had some theologians read [the document] and even [had it read] officially by the theologian of the Pontifical Household, that is a Dominican, and with the beautiful tradition of the Dominicans not to go on a witch-hunt, but to see where is the right thing... and he approved it.

If anyone feels bad, I understand it, it is not an everyday thing... not a step back. It is a step forward. But, step forward that comes after 50 years, from the Council, that must be developed. The historians say that a council takes 100 years to take root in the Church. We are halfway. And this draws even my attention. I will tell you that I saw a phrase, but this phrase I do not know if it is sure, but it is a phrase from the Council... It has surprised even me... Also in the Islamic world there are different opinions, there are some more radical than others. Yesterday in the council of the elders there was also at least one Shiite, and that gave a very great universality, and he spoke well. There will be - I don't know well - but there will be discrepancies, but it is a process and processes mature like flowers, like fruit.

Gisotti: Thanks, Holy Father. Let's go now to the Francophone group. Mathilde Imberty of Radio France.

Mathilde Imberty (Radio France): Good afternoon, Holy Father. You've just concluded a visit to the Emirates and in a very short time you'll go to Morocco. We seem to understand that you chose to speak with very precise interlocutors of Islam. Is it a conscious choice? The historic document signed yesterday is very ambitious for education. In your perspective, can this truly touch the Muslim faithful? Thanks.

Pope Francis: I know and I've heard from some Muslims that it needs to be studied in universities, at least in Al-Azhar for sure, and in schools. It must be studied, not imposed... studied! This to begin from the end of your question.

It's a bit by chance the proximity of the two trips because I wanted to go to Marrakesh but there were protocol issues and I couldn't go to an international encounter without first making a visit to the country but I didn't have time. And for this we postponed the visit and it's in coincidence with this. And it was the Secretary of State to go to Marrakesh. It's a question of diplomacy and of education, as well, but it wasn't a planned thing. In Morocco, I follow in the footsteps of St. John Paul II who went there. He was the first to go. It will be a nice trip. Then, invitations have arrived from other Muslim countries but there's not time this year. We'll see next year. I or the other Peter, someone will go.

Gisotti: Good, well maybe we can do it, Maria Sagrario Ruiz of Radio Nacional Espana. Ok, thank you.

Maria Sagrario Ruiz (Radio Nacional Espana): Good evening, I have a question in Spanish. Vatican diplomacy has a great history and practices this diplomacy of small steps in areas of conflict, and how can we not recall concretely 1978, when John Paul II, with his mediation averted a war between your country, Argentina, and Chile. We know from yesterday that Nicolas Maduro – and we arrive at Venezuela – has sent a letter asking for help to restart the

dialogue. There is Secretary of State Parolin who knows the country perfectly, all eyes are on you, on Pope Francis and the Vatican. What is the Vatican doing or what do you think? Are you willing to mediate, if asked, at what point, at what time?

Pope Francis: Thank you. The mediation between Argentina and Chile was truly a courageous act of Saint John Paul II that averted a war, which was at the point [of happening]. But there are little steps, the last is mediation. There are little initial or facilitating steps, but not only in the Vatican, in all diplomacy; closeness to one another to start the possibility for dialogue. This is done in diplomacy. I believe that from the Secretariat of State, they will be able to explain well all of the different steps that can be made. I knew before the trip that a letter from Maduro arrived in the diplomatic pouch. This letter I have not read it yet, this one that arrived. We will see what can be done. But in order for us to take the last step, mediation, it takes the will of both parties. If both parties ask...this was the case for Argentina and Chile.

The Holy See in Venezuela was present in the time of dialogue with your compatriot Rodriguez Zapatero, a first meeting with Monsignor Tscherrig initially, and then continued with Monsignor Celli ... and there gave birth to a mouse, nothing ... smoke!

Now, I do not know, I will look at that letter and I will see what can be done. But the initial conditions are that both parties ask. We are always willing. The same when people go to the parish priest because there is a problem between the husband and wife... one goes and the other comes or does not come? He wants or does not want to go? Both parties are always needed. This is the secret. And [for] the countries [this] is a condition that that they must do, think before asking -- [for a] a facilitation or presence of a savior or mediation. Both parties always. Thank you! And I'll go to Spain, eh?

Gisotti: Thank you. Nicole is approaching. Nicole Winfield of Associated Press will ask her question now.

Nicole Winfield, AP: Holy Father, last week the women's magazine of L'Osservatore Romano published an article denouncing sexual abuse of consecrated women in the Church. Adult women, sisters, by clergy. Some months ago, the Union of Superiors General, UISG, also made a public denouncement of this problem. We know that the coming meeting in the Vatican will be on the abuse of minors, but can we think that the Holy See might do something to confront this problem, maybe with a document, guidelines, etc?

Pope Francis: I will respond to this question, but I prefer to finish with the [questions about the] trip and then first thing I will respond to yours. Is it okay like that?

Gisotti: So, while Nicole stays here, we reach Angelina Condé of Rome Reports.

Angelina Condé (Rome Reports): Good evening Holy Father, on behalf of the Spanish group I'll ask you the question in Spanish, I think that's okay for you. You had a meeting with the Council of Elders. From what you can tell us, what issues did you touch upon and did you return to Rome with the impression that your message was received by their representatives?

Pope Francis: The elderly are truly wise. The Grande Imam spoke first, then each one of them spoke starting with the eldest, who yes, spoke Spanish because he was from Mauritania and learned it there. Elderly, eh, 80 years old, up to the youngest, who is the secretary of the Council of Elders. He spoke a little bit but said everything in a video: the unique thing about him is that he is a communicator. I liked this, it was a beautiful thing.

They spoke...they started...The keyword is "wisdom." Then "loyalty." Then they emphasized a way of life in which this wisdom

grows and the fidelity becomes strong and from there the friendship between people is born. They were different, I don't know how to explain it. One was Shia Islam, others of different nuances...Then wisdom and fidelity is the important path to building peace because peace is a work of wisdom and fidelity; Human fidelity between people and all of this. I have been left with the impression of being in the midst of true wise men and this is a guarantee for the Grand Imam to have this advice.

You are satisfied, I suppose?

Condé: Yes. Very satisfied. Thank you.

Gisotti: Here is Cristiana Caricato. Cristiana...Here we are. The Holy Father said that he's responding to the questions on the trip. The Holy Father said to stick to the trip and then...

Pope Francis: Any more questions on the flight? There's one!

Gisotti: We have Sofia Barbarani from The National, which is a very important newspaper for Abu Dhabi and in these days.... Sofia Barbarani, The National, Abu Dhabi.

Sofia Barbarani, The National: Good evening! The question we wanted to ask you on behalf of the group of newspapers from Abu Dhabi was: today a little girl brought you a letter, she ran to you when you were in the car. We would like to know if you have read the letter yet and if you knew what...

Pope Francis: Not yet. The letters are there, they're organizing them for me to read afterwards.

Barbarani: Can you tell us what impression that made on you when you saw this little girl coming towards you, this little girl who escaped from the crowd?

Pope Francis: She's a brave girl! But she was stopped... Let her come, but that little girl has a future. She has a future and I dare say, poor husband. She has a future, but is brave, I liked it! It takes courage to do that, and then another one followed her, there were two, she saw that one and she took courage.

Gisotti: There are other questions from the trip: Ines San Martin and Franca Giansoldati. If you are very quick...

Pope Francis: Maybe there will be other questions which are not from the trip, there's one...

Gisotti: A booking... Franca, sit down, please...briefly, please.

Franca Giansoldati, Il Messaggero: Your Holiness, Imam el-Tayeb denounced Islamophobia, emphasized Islamophobia, the fear of Islam... Why didn't we hear anything about Christianophobia or about the persecution of Christians?

Pope Francis: Indeed, I spoke about the persecution of Christians, not in that moment, but I'm also talking about it frequently, also during this trip I spoke about it, I don't remember where, but I spoke about it. I don't know, I think that the document was more about unity and friendship and I underscored that... but now it comes to mind, also the document condemns violence and some groups that call themselves Islamic (the elders say it's not Islamism) persecuting Christians. I remember that father, on Lesbos, with three children who was 30 years old and he cried: "I'm Islamic, my wife was Christian. The ISIS terrorists came, they saw the cross and they said to her, convert, and then they cut her throat in front of me." This is our daily bread of terrorist groups, not only of Christians, also the destruction of the person. The document was strongly condemnatory in this sense.

Gisotti: Ines San Martin, always on the flight. Ines San Martin, Crux.

Inés San Martín, Crux: Holy Father. One question related to what my colleague has just asked, since we didn't have the time to arrange it. As I told you in the last trip, I interviewed the new Archbishop of Mosul in Iraq. He always says that they are waiting for you. He also denies that the bishops are arguing about it, they are just waiting for you. You have spoken about religious liberty, saying that it goes beyond freedom of worship. Can you explain this subject? We are coming back from a country that it is known for its tolerance but many Catholic people that were today in the stadium have the opportunity, just today since they first arrived to the UAE, to demonstrate their faith and belief. So, is there anything that has actually changed beyond today?

Pope Francis: Processes have a beginning, right? You can prepare something and you make it and that's it. There's something before and something after it. I think religious liberty is in process, always more, always forward. I was impressed by a conversation I had with a 13 year old kid in Rome, before leaving. (...) He told me: "Holiness, I want to say that I am an atheist. What should I do as an atheist to become a man of peace?" I told him: "Do that which you feel," then I spoke to him a little bit more, but I liked the courage of this boy. He is an atheist but he searches for the good.

That path is also a process, a process that we should respect and accompany. To accompany all processes for good, all, whatever color they are, of any color. I think these are the steps forward.

Gisotti: Here, Holy Father, the time is little... however, there is a response to give.

[Ed. Note: Pope Francis responds to the question about abuse of women religious by clergy from above.]

Pope Francis: It's true, it's a problem. The mistreatment of women is a problem. I would dare to say that humanity still hasn't matured. The woman is [considered] "second class." Let's begin here: it's a cultural problem. Then one arrives up to femicide. There are countries in which the mistreatment of women reaches [the point of] femicide and before arriving to your concrete question, a curiosity that they have told me, but you do the investigation to know if it's true or not: I've been told that the beginning of the history of women's jewelry came about in an ancient country, I do not know, of the East, where there was the law of chasing away, repudiating, the woman. If the husband - I don't know if it's true or not - said to her, "go away," in that moment with what she was wearing she had to go without taking anything. And there, they began to make jewels of gold and precious stones, to have something to survive. I don't know if it's true or not, but it is interesting. Do the investigation.

It's true, within the Church there have been clerics who have done this. In some civilizations a little stronger than in others. It is not a thing that all have done. There have been priests and also bishops who have done that. And I believe that it may still be being done. It's not a thing that from the moment in which you realize it, it's over. The thing goes forward like this. We've been working on this for a long time. We've suspended some clerics, sent them away for this, and also - I don't know if the process is finished - dissolved some women's religious congregations that were very tied up in this, a corruption. I cannot say: at my home... It's true! Must something more be done? Yes. Do we have the will? Yes.

But it is a path that has come from afar. Pope Benedict had the courage to dissolve a women's congregation that had a certain level because this slavery of women had entered, even sexual slavery, by

clerics or by the founder. Sometimes the founder takes the freedom, empties the freedom of the sisters, it can arrive to this.

About Pope Benedict I would like to underscore that he is a man that had the courage to do many things on this theme. There's an anecdote: he had all the papers, all the documents, on a religious organization that had within it even sexual and economic corruption. He went there, there were filters, he couldn't arrive. In the end, the Pope, with the will to see the truth, called a meeting and Joseph Ratzinger left there with the folder and all of his papers. When he came back, he said to his secretary: put it in the archive, the other party won. We mustn't be scandalized by this. They are steps in a process. But when he became Pope, the first thing [he said was]: bring me this from the archives and he began. The folklore about Pope Benedict makes him seem so good -- he is good, a piece of bread is worse than him -- but weak, but there's nothing weak [in him]. He's a strong man, a consistent man... and he started, and there in that congregation there was this problem that you say. Pray so that we can move forward. I want to go forward. There are cases, yes. But everywhere, but in some preferably new congregations, some, and in some regions more than others. Yes. And this... We are working.

Gisotti: Thank you, Holy Father, thank you to all of you, but there is a surprise for a colleague who has reached a very important milestone. (Valentina Alazraki)

Pope Francis: They told me that we're celebrating your 150th birthday [Ed. Note: he means 150th apostolic trip].

Gisotti: 151st, I think.

Pope Francis: But, no! I don't see her that mummified [old], but she is one that has interesting roots. I once told her: if she goes for a blood sample...

Thank you so much. Pray for me, don't forget. I need it. Thank you.

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